Marx & Philosophy Review of Books

http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2010/111 also published in:

Labour/Le Travail *Journal of Canadian Labour Studies* Issue 64, Fall 2009, p.282

http://journals.hil.unb.ca/index.php/LLT/article/viewFile/12607/13491

Lars Svendsen
Work
Acumen, Stocksfield, 2008. 138pp., £10.99 pb
ISBN 9781844651542

Review by Rajeev Sehgal

At the outset, Svenden states that there isn't a thesis in his book. In a 'Wittgensteinian style', the author aims to provide 'a collection of snapshots of various aspects of work, of what it has been, of what it is and what it perhaps will become' (11). However, there is more of a thesis in this book than the author prepares us for which he actually confesses to at the end. In view of his thesis, the spirit of the book seems to owe more to the political philosophy of Hegel than to the relatively apolitical Wittgenstein. What Svenden in effect advances is a conservative Hegelian *reconciliation* with work in our capitalist age. The central claims of his thesis seem to be that we are much better off than workers in the past; we underestimate the goodness of current work and that we should be sceptical of philosophers who argue for revolutionary changes to the work that we have. I'll say something about each of these three aspects of his thesis.

First, contrary to what one might expect and what Svenden seems to promise, there isn't a historical account of the forms of work, or kinds of worker, through the ages given in the book. There are the occasional remarks about slavery of antiquity and the long working hours of the Victorian factory worker which seem to feed his view about how good work is these days. Apparently we should consider ourselves lucky and 'part-timers' in comparison to the work shifts of the Victorians. The chapter length treatment of the past which Svenden does provide actually contains a narrative about attitudes to work that we get from various philosophers and theologians through the ages. From this history he makes much of the Protestant work ethic that we get from Luther and Calvin. They came to consider the conduct of all forms of work (even the lowly, menial and mundane) as virtuous and as part of the good human life. For them, dedicating oneself to one's work tracks God's will. Rewards in the afterlife await those who knuckle down and get on with the work that society throws up. Thus we should not really question the drudgery of work or misery that it might induce in us. The alternative is idleness, which is a greater evil for the individual and society to suffer. Weber famously argued that this ethic had a major part to play in the productivity of industrial capitalism.

Svenden accepts Weber's thesis and broadly celebrates the opportunities for work, income and consumption that capitalism has delivered. He also seems to subscribe to a 'secular' version of the Protestant work ethic. However, instead of pinning our hopes for rewards in the afterlife, the 'real' return for knuckling down to the work that we have, and for not pushing against the capitalist system that throws up various forms of work for us, is that it provides us with a means

to engage in other activities which make life worth living – family, friendships, consumption and 'self-realising' hobbies. This said, Svenden does not think that most of us are condemned to drudgery and misery in work. We don't have to consider our work in purely instrumental terms. He asserts that there are intrinsic rewards ('fun' and 'personal development') contained in most, if not all, forms of the work. To support this view Svenden makes much (too much) of his own happy pre-philosophy work experience as a cleaner. Towards the end of the book he claims that: 'We do not experience our jobs as sources of disappointment'. 'Job satisfaction is consistently high in the Western world'. 'Eighty to ninety per cent of employees say that they are either completely or mostly happy with their jobs' (109).

Svenden does not provide us with references to any empirical studies to back up such incredible claims. Indeed such claims seem to conflict with other claims that he makes about present day work. He tells us that Manpower Inc. is the largest private employer in the US (41). He also tells us that 'permanent temp' work ends up being a highly frustrating and ultimately intrudes on our ability to plan for and succeed in those things that make life worth living. Such clash of claims and his approach to serious studies of contemporary work create the impression that Svenden has a confused, reluctant and superficial grasp of what is going on and that he just helps himself to enough 'facts' (including his seemingly unique experiences as a happy cleaner) to support his conservative thesis. Svenden is unfairly dismissive of serious journalist attempts to report the nature of work for those at the bottom end of Western society such as Polly Toynbee's *Hard Work* and Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed.* He completely ignores what Madeline Bunting documents about the pressures of long working hours (which include workers higher up the socio-economic order) in her book *Willing Slaves: How the Overwork Culture is Ruling Our Lives*. It is questionable what he draws from studies that he does use to support his conservatism. He cites Arlie Russell Hochschild's *The Time Bind* to show that we are mostly happy with the hours that we work. Apparently, when asked, 10% of workers want shorter working hours; 65% wanted the same and 25% wanted more hours at work. Svenden concludes from this that we are not overworked. However, it seems that what we want in terms of work hours is a function of the income that we need. Russell's survey might just prove that two thirds of workers want to sustain the income which their current working hours supply and that a quarter of workers could do with more income-hours. Such surveys do not necessarily prove that workers are happy with their work hours in-themselves. If Svenden had conducted more charitable engagement with the studies he swiftly dismisses and ignores, and been more critical of the studies that he does use, then I suspect he would be less confident in his conservative and complacent views about the state of modern work.

Svenden's conservatism drives his reaction against those who argue for, first, the empirical claim that work *is* in the process of being radically transformed by technology. Second, the normative claim that it is *good* that this technological revolution is taking place because of the badness of capitalist work and the opportunity it affords us to re-structure work in the future. Karl Marx argues for both of these claims and is something of a bête noire for Svenden. Marx claims that capitalists are in the process of replacing labour factors by capital factors of production. This claim has recent support from Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The End of Work*. Furthermore, Marx claims that capitalism should deliver capital-intensive technologies to human society so that we can consign mundane, menial and alienating wage-labour to the dustbin of history. Humans should be left free to perform those aspects of production that computers and machines can't do. That is, work which require the development, exercise and expression of our generically human capacities for creativity and judgement. It is from such work that humans can derive a measure of meaning and self-realisation.

Svenden is sceptical about the truth of the empirical claim and the worthiness of the normative claim and unconvincingly tries to challenge Marx and Rifkin. Against the wealth of argument that Rifkin presents in favour of the empirical claim, Svenden provides a couple of weak counterexamples. Against the normative claim, Svenden suggests that Marx over blows the miseries of capitalist work and mistakenly invests work with aspirations meaning and self-realisation. These ideals should be sought and secured in other aspects of our lives and not necessarily in the work that we do. For Marx, work cannot be neatly sectioned off from the rest of our lives. Indeed the problems that we might have at work do seamlessly affect other aspects of our lives, especially our personal relationships. For Marx the good life necessarily requires us to secure self-esteem and self-respect from the work that we do and it requires that we use the technological opportunities that capitalism present us with in order to deliver conditions of freedom and the good life to each and everyone. Svenden does not take such ideas seriously enough.

Svenden should have been more upfront with the conservative thesis of his book and more respectful of those he disagrees with. As it is, the book is too frustrating for my academic mind and I suspect it will infuriate those who think that there is much wrong with the state of work these days and it's worth the struggle to put it right.

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5 March 2010

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